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BUSINESS AS USUAL? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINA'S NEWS COVERAGE IN U.S. AND CHINESE ONLINE MEDIA

是否一如从前? — 美国媒体对中国的报道和中国在线媒体报道的对比研究

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Business as usual?

**A comparative study of China's news coverage
in U.S. and Chinese online media**

**A thesis submitted to the School of Humanities, Xiamen University,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of M.A. in
Chinese Culture.**

By Roberto Spiezio

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ABSTRACT

This comparative and mainly quantitative study explores the online news coverage on China and the attitudes of the outlets towards the country in its various socio-political, economic and cultural aspects. It sampled four news organizations' websites, two in the United States and two in China and analyzed around 400 news items over a period of 10 weeks in early 2010. It found that while the NY Times insisted on topical political and cultural issues and presented mostly negative-tone articles when covering China, the CNN Interactive, the China Daily and the Global Times, that overall offer a view on a wide range of issues, present a decidedly more positive standpoint. The study also deals with key issues related to the images of China on the global media scene. It sees in the multiplication of the Chinese-based media outlets, on and offline, in recent times, signs of the beginning of a shift in the global media discourse on China. In the light of the agenda-setting theory, this might have an important effect on influencing and shaping the images of China around the world, especially in the west, even though it seems still too soon to assess the actual influence of the new organizations.

Keywords: China, Content Analysis, Media, Online News, United States

内容摘要

这份研究主要通过定量分析法，探究了对中国的网络新闻报道以及这些新闻报道体现出来的对中国的社会政治、经济和文化等方面的态度。本文采用四个新闻机构网站（两个美国的、两个中国的）在 2010 年早期 10 周内大约 400 条的新闻报道，通过分析发现，在对中国的报道方面，纽约时报一贯报道时事政治和文化，大多数带有负面基调，而其他的新闻机构，比如美国新闻信息网交互电视网、中国日报和环球日报，总体上说报道面广泛，持明确的、积极的立场。本文还对一些全球性媒体事件中的中国形象进行了分析，发现随着最近基于中国背景的在线或非在线的媒介出版物的增多，全球媒体对中国的报道开始发生改变。尽管对于这些新闻机构的实际影响力的评估还言之过早，但是根据议程设置理论，这对于塑造中国在世界上的形象，增加中国的影响力，尤其增强中国在西方国家世界中的影响力，可能有着重要的作用。

关键词： 中国，内容分析法，媒体，网络新闻报道，美国

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
内容摘要	iii
Contents	iv
目录	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Literature Review	7
Chapter 2: Methodology	24
Chapter 3: A Review of US and China Online Media	34
Chapter 4: Online News Coverage On China: Content Analysis	43
Chapter 5: Online News Coverage On China: Text Analysis	50
Chapter 6: Shifting the Global Media Balance	56
Conclusion	65
Bibliography	68
Appendix A: Content Analysis Coding Sheet	77
Appendix B: Content / Text Analysis Details	81
Appendix C: Alexa Website Traffic Graphs	105

目录

致谢	i
英文摘要	ii
中文摘要	iii
英文目录	iv
中文目录	v
绪论	1
第一章：文献综述	7
第二章：研究方法	24
第三章：中国和美国网络媒体概况	34
第四章：中国网络媒体新闻报道：内容分析	43
第五章：中国网络媒体新闻报道：文本分析	50
第六章：全球媒介报道平衡中的新生力量	56
结论	65
参考文献	68
附录 A：内容分析编码表	77
附录 B：内容分析/文本分析细则	101
附录 C：Alexa 世界网站流量统计表	105

INTRODUCTION

The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page – Augustine of Hippo

One of the questions that Chinese people often ask me as a foreigner is why I decided to come to China, which is immediately and invariably followed by the question “What do you think of China and the Chinese people?” The answer to the first question is not difficult, and forms in part the motivations behind this research and my enrolment in the MA program in Chinese Culture at Xiamen University. The answer to the second would prove quite complex and cannot find appropriate space in this context.

My interest in China has an origin. If I had to identify a starting point, I would say it was when, as primary school children, my classmates and I were offered a screening of a then TV hit, the drama *Marco Polo*¹ (IMDB, 2010a, np.). The story of the incredible journey of the Venetian explorer, and the marvels he encountered along the way easily stimulated the fantasy of us children, to the point that the “Cathay” he described looked like a mythical land, rich and wonderful. Needless to say, after the screening everybody in my class wanted to visit that fabulous place.

That first exposure to China was fuelled up a few years later, at my junior high school, when, thanks to one of the most wonderful teachers I have ever met, my interest in Asia in general and China in particular increased and deepened.

The years passed but China never went actually out of my thoughts and my interests.

Macau, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing were all cities that I felt I *had to* visit, not only to enhance my knowledge of the world, but also to pursue my childhood wishes, bloomed in that dark room during the screening of *Marco Polo* and matured over the years.

¹ *Marco Polo* was a very popular TV drama produced and aired in the early 1980s. Although it was an Italian state television production, even Chinese and American actors participated.

It is safe for me to say that Zhang Yimou's filmography also had a relevant role in shaping my ideas of China, Chinese people and Chinese culture and contributed to arousing my curiosity about the theme of this research.

I have seen almost all of his movies, and in each of them I have found something to learn about the Chinese people. First and foremost, I have had the chance to know the moving poetry of rural life in a village of China, through the film 《我的父亲母亲》 or *The Road Home* (IMDB, 2010b, np.) narrating the story of a young country girl (played by Zhang Ziyi) who falls in love with a young teacher, and their courtship that became famous in the village.

Another film, 《有话好好说》 or *Keep Cool* (IMDB, 2010c, np.) opened a window on the tragicomic life of a book seller in Beijing at the end of the millennium, amidst social changes, westernization and old cultural patterns. It was a movie that caught my attention because of the contradictions that it portrayed, giving me the opportunity to understand the struggle of the average Chinese between modernity and tradition.

Zhang's 《一个都不能少》 or *Not One Less*, starring Wei Minzhi (IMDB, 2010d, np.), was probably the film that most impressed and moved me, facing social problems like rural illiteracy and poverty in China.

As a young adult, when I was studying in the UK, I had the opportunity to meet and spend a remarkable share of time with my Chinese classmates. Coming from all over the country, their backgrounds were also very different.

There was a Fudan University graduate who wanted to travel and discover the world, there was a CCTV journalist who wanted to perfect her skills, there were a few people tired with their own daily lives and looking for a fresh start.

Almost every province and every walk of life were gathered in the same classroom.

I also had the opportunity to speak with a few of them about their own country and their culture, in which I was then already interested.

We talked about politics, culture, economy, and it was quite enjoyable for me to learn their points of view on those realities, because it forced me to challenge my assumptions and my stereotypes about the Middle Kingdom.

Among the points that emerged most frequently in our discussions, one was that China was seen as a united country, on the verge of undergoing great changes and facing great challenges, economically, socially and internationally. A common idea was also that China was still perceived as a developing nation, not at the same level as other Western countries, but that was making a great effort to bridge the divide.

There was also a widespread pride for being Chinese and for being heirs to 5,000 years of history, which I would call a sort of nationalistic pride, totally unknown to me, because in my country we do not have a sense of belonging to the same nation, we have never had it, and I suspect that we never will.

Completing the picture was the general tendency of my classmates to highlight all the positive aspects of the country, with little or no constructive criticism, and there was also a widespread conviction that the west –as a whole- was misunderstanding China and the Chinese. What my friends were usually pointing out was what they perceived as remarkably biased and partial news coverage on China, especially in the American media.

All of those discussions –as well as Zhang Yimou's movies- inspired me to elaborate some ideas in order to look into the issue of what kind of China would emerge from the online news coverage in the west and in China as well.

The key question I tried to answer with my research would therefore be: what images of China emerge from the online news coverage on the country? The answer is complex, I believe, and implies answering a number of related questions: what do these media talk about when considering China? What news do they give most relevance to and –possibly²- why? How do they talk about China?

² Accessing Chinese editors for ideally necessary interviews proved difficult, whereas American editors were more accessible. I therefore decided not to include any interviews in my chosen methodologies and rely solely on methods not directly involving people, not to create unfair unbalances in the perspectives emerging from the both sides.

I believe this could be a somehow revealing and relevant study, in which I am particularly interested, given my educational background and the cultural studies I have pursued here in China. I also believe that a deeper insight into these aspects of the Chinese culture and society would eventually improve the understanding between China and the West. This paper also hopes to represent a small contribution towards this important goal.

As I discussed in the methodology chapter, the choice of the media –all of them in English language- followed a strict importance criterion. It was my intention to research into the major online outlets of the US and China, because they might reach and influence a larger share of the potential audience.

1.2 Limitations of the Study

It is necessary to briefly assess the limitations of the research, because it presents several challenges and potentially opportunities for future expansion.

Firstly, given obvious time and resource constraints, and also the specific and “narrowed-down” characteristic of a MA thesis, it was not possible to extend the research to the level of depth it would deserve.

The amount of data collected was relatively small in absolute terms, even if hopefully sufficient for the purposes of a MA thesis. The consequence was that the conclusions I expected to infer from the research would presumably belong to the realm of “indications” rather than that of certainties. No strong claims were made, anyway, even because the world of information nowadays, especially when it comes to talking about a fast-changing reality like China, is subjected to a rapid evolution, to the point that what we can claim today as true might not be also true tomorrow.

A second aspect to consider is that this study would deserve to be reprised and expanded not only to fill unavoidable gaps in this research³, but also to assess

³ The main focus was not assessing the bias of the Chinese or US media, nor discussing whether they serve an agenda and what that would be. In the present context, I was more interested in the ideas, images and general attitudes expressed through the media. Moreover, this study would deserve to be expanded into the analysis of other media, like TV and printed media, as I believe a visual analysis would be quite revealing of the discourse on China.

pre-conditions and historical changes over a number of years in the images of China emerging in the online news coverage.

This would be also interesting in order to see whether this evolution will be reflecting actual social, economic and political changes.

This all constitutes a great challenge for every scholar, I believe, but also an exciting and worthy one. So we put our hopes and our present effort in the hands of the future.

This is how I started to be interested in the subject that forms the core of this research. Having been passionate about China for years, I decided to learn more and to try to open a window on these complex and controversial phenomena for those who know little or nothing about it.

The literature review deals with a short historical review of the technologies that have brought to the massive use of the World Wide Web, as we know it today, given the increasingly extensive usage that journalism has been doing of this platform over the past 10-15 years. It deals as well with a short history of the media in the USA and China. I finally discuss previous work related to the images and perceptions of China in the western and U.S. media.

Also, I review and discuss the methodologies I used for my research, giving details about the choices I made and highlighting the limits that these methods present. Two are the main methodologies of choice: content analysis and textual analysis, both aimed at answering my research questions⁴.

Chapters Three to Six respectively examine the following aspects of China's online news coverage in the United States and China: Chapter Three presents the news organizations I have chosen for my study⁵: the New York Times and the Cable News Network (CNN) in the United States, the China Daily and the Global Times in China. It also provides some insight into their readerships and their web traffic statistics, in order to try to assess the potential impact those outlets may have on the public.

⁴ This is mainly a quantitative study. However qualitative data can be inferred from quantitative methodologies.

⁵ I consider the online versions of the abovementioned news organizations.

Chapters Four and Five are an exposition, an analysis and a discussion of the content and text analyses that I applied to the abovementioned news organizations.

The purpose of these analyses is to verify how these news websites compare to each other in terms of news types, nature of the story, amount of coverage, and what I define the “mood” of a news story, that is, the attitude of the article towards its subject, China, as explored in its various aspects. All this, with the purpose to assess what kind of China is depicted in the news coverage in the both countries and, possibly, what kind of images these media outlets contribute to shape among the target audiences.

Chapter Six deals with other issues and current trends in the Chinese media, as a key to understand what seems to be the attempt to introduce a major shift in the global media discourse on the country and therefore influence the images of China in the world, primarily America. It evaluates the coming into being of a large number of diverse media in English language –but not only- by giving a short introduction of some of the most prominent ones. It finally argues that the core of the problem related to shaping the images of China in the media is predominantly cultural, not journalistic. The message carried by the media is more likely to exert an effective influence if the media start “speaking the language” of their target audiences, keeping into due account their cultural contexts and reference values. This is valid not only for the Chinese news organizations, but also for the western media.

At the end of this paper the conclusions of the study are presented. A bibliography and appendixes with additional materials are also included.

Given the limitedness of the research, several questions will remain unanswered and several others will be hopefully raised for the sake of the advancement of research in this field.

However, if my thesis ever manages to arouse the interest in the topic in even only one reader and contributes to a better mutual understanding between the west and China, then I will have reached my purpose.

Chapter One

The dream behind the Web is of a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information. Its universality is essential: the fact that a hypertext link can point to anything, be it personal, local or global, be it draft or highly polished. There was a second part of the dream, too, dependent on the Web being so generally used that it became a realistic mirror (or in fact the primary embodiment) of the ways in which we work and play and socialize. That was that once the state of our interactions was on line, we could then use computers to help us analyse it, make sense of what we are doing, where we individually fit in, and how we can better work together. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, 1998.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2008 China held the Olympic Games in the city of Beijing. Kicking off on August 8, 2008 at 8:08 pm (BBC, 2008. np.) the Chinese Olympiad vowed to be something grand, possibly the grandest show this planet had ever seen. This appeared clear nearly immediately when, gathered in the recently built Bird's Nest, Beijing's Olympic stadium, or around the world in front of a TV screen, a crowd of billions witnessed the marvels of the Chinese culture, magisterially summarized in the Opening Ceremony, supervised by film director Zhang Yimou, and defined "spectacular" by the BBC (ibid.).

The lights, the fireworks, the mass choreographies and the glitters seemed to be finally putting an end to the problems that the Olympic Committee had been having during the period of the torch relay, when protesters, in particular in Europe but also North America, widely shown on camera by all of the major western TV networks, were manifesting their discontent about thorny political issues that, according to Olympics experts themselves, little or nothing had to do with sports⁶ (Friedman, 2008. np.).

During that hot spring of 2008, large crowds of Chinese students in the UK and North America organized themselves to protest against what was perceived as a widespread bias of the western media when reporting on China and to show their support to the country⁷. The media was accused not to be objective and to

⁶Anthony Bykerk, the secretary general of the International Society of Olympic Historians said: "This is worse because now they are protesting against the torch relay, which has nothing to do with politics but is supposed to be a symbol of unity — not used as protest" (ibid.).

⁷ I witnessed one of these rallies myself in the UK, in the summer of 2008. Major cities of the UK, like London, constituted the venue for a number of peaceful protest rallies by young Chinese, showing their support to their country and the Olympic Games. An Internet campaign also started, called "I

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